

SITUATION IN EL DORADO

EMS providers integral part of state's response



photo: Flower Mound Fire Department EMS

In April, DSHS was asked to provide ambulances to assist with the state's evacuation of children from the Yearning for Zion Ranch in Schleicher County. State EMS Director Maxie Bishop talks to *Texas EMS Magazine* about what happened in El Dorado and why the Memorandum of Agreements for EMS providers and personnel are so important for Texas.

When did you first hear about what was going on?

It was Tuesday, April 7. We were told we were going to need 26 ambulances with three-person crews, and one of the crew had to be female. At that point, they were really just giving us a heads up. We started pulling MOAs and making sure we had contact information for providers. On Tuesday, April 8, about 9 a.m., we got a request for two ambulances and at 11:15 a.m. that request was placed on hold. At 2:56 p.m., we had a request for four ambulances in San Angelo by Wednesday, the 9th. We got those ambulances from Champion EMS. At 3:20 the request was cancelled. Meanwhile, we just continued to make sure we were ready if we were called.

It wasn't until Sunday, the 13th that we actually deployed ambulances that ended up making it to San Angelo. We deployed 11 ambulances that day. On Monday we were told to demobilize those ambulances. But we kept two from Champion EMS on location for the people in the coliseum as well as our staff. At any one time, there were more than 400 kids and mothers, and many hundreds of staff from several state agencies.

On Sunday, the 30th, at 11:56 a.m., we had a request for four ambulances and by 9:24 that night it was up to eight ambulances to accompany the buses during the evacuation. We sent those units and they made their runs. Those units were demobilized on Tuesday after the kids arrived at their destinations.

What kind of things did personnel do?

The ambulances were to be part of a convoy led by DPS taking the kids to various foster homes around the state. Some of the medics were placed on buses to accompany the children to the locations.

This situation seemed to go pretty smoothly as far as the ambulances deploying. Why do you think that is?

First of all, we only needed a small number of ambulances. And we learned a lot from Hurricane Dean deployment. The biggest thing for us was how we sent out the documents. We were able to email the MOA providers instead of faxing them. We learned from the last time that emailing the documents and deployments letters worked better because people don't always sit by fax machines but they have access to computers. Everyone seemed to like that process. Email created one challenge, though. When we initially sent out the email that put people on notice that we might need ambulances, we found out some email addresses had not been updated by providers.

What else was a challenge?

This whole event was different than what we had planned for a hurricane deployment.

One of our biggest challenges was communications. Everyone is not on the same radio frequency, so communication can be a problem. So we ended up borrowing hand-held radios. Thanks to STRAC (Southwest Texas Regional Advisory Council) for putting those on the ambulances.

We also found some services still do not understand deployment and what conditions the medics may face. They didn't understand that sleeping arrangements might not be in a hotel, that food might not be readily available. Crews

may have makeshift sleeping quarters. It might be more primitive than people are used to. During hurricane activation, we've already worked out some of those logistical issues like sleeping quarters and food. But this was totally new territory. Another thing is immunizations. Providers need to make sure immunizations are up-to-date. We had some children with chicken pox and immunizations became important. That's just a matter of educating providers. We continue to learn how to improve the response.

How does reimbursement work?

We gave providers forms before and after the mission and we asked them to submit the completed paperwork to our office. Once we got them, we verified the charges and in this case, we submitted them to HHSC (Health and Human Service Commission, the umbrella agency) for payment. We scanned them and forwarded to HHSC by email to speed up the process. We offered technical assistance to any providers who needed it and sent reminders to those providers who had not returned the forms. HHSC verifies the information and cuts the checks. Some providers reported receiving checks beginning in early June.

This was such an unusual occurrence. What other kinds of situations will you need providers who've signed MOAs?

It could be anything, any type of disaster. It is hurricane season and so that's in the forefront of our minds. We could need ambulances in a pandemic, almost anything that overwhelms the resources of the local emergency response providers.

Could Texas use more providers who will sign MOAs?

We're expected to provide ambulances to anywhere in the state where they're needed.

I would love to have every provider in the state sign an MOA because we don't know what kind of disaster or need for ambulances there will be. If everyone will participate, at least we'll have a pool of people. For instance, if a provider can't respond to a hurricane, maybe the provider can respond to

another type of need. Providers who sign MOAs need to remember that it's voluntary when we call. Maybe they can't respond at that time, but there might be something at some point closer they'd want to respond to. It is better to have the MOA on file.

We're working with the TALON (Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and New Mexico) states now for EMACs (Emergency Management Assistance Compacts) using the Texas MOA as an example, particularly for the rates of reimbursement. That way, if there is a need for ambulances in other states, our providers will be reimbursed at the same rates as they are in Texas. We're proud of Texas EMS providers. Texas needed them, and they came through.

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EMS Deployment to San Angelo/Eldorado

Acadian EMS
American Medical Response
BSA Hospital Corp EMS
Bulverde Spring Branch EMS
Canyon Lake Fire/EMS
Central EMS
Champion EMS
Cypress Creek EMS
East Texas Medical Center EMS

Flower Mound Fire Department EMS
Montgomery County Hospital District EMS
New Braunfels Fire Department
Northwest Rural EMS
Seguin Fire/EMS
Washington County EMS
Wise County EMS



photo: Flower Mound Fire Department EMS

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Letter from a provider who responded to El Dorado:

Quite honestly, I think that our DSHS folks (Steve, Aaron, Pam, Brian, Charlie, and Pat) did an outstanding job. I know it was quite a difficult task for them with lots of stressful situations, a lot of situations in which they were under the leadership of (Governor's Division of Emergency Management) or (Child Protective Services) and had to just do the best they could. They were wonderful about listening to our concerns and addressing our questions and did everything in their power to make sure things were as comfortable and organized as they could possibly make it. They constantly encouraged us to call their cell phones should we have any problems or concerns...and they were always there to answer our calls and to do anything they could to help us. Although not everything was perfect and there was room for improvement, it was overall, one of the most rewarding experiences of my life!

*Susan Neel, LP
Director
Central EMS*



photo: Flower Mound Fire Department EMS

DSHS LOOKING FOR DISASTER RESPONDERS

DSHS is looking for licensed EMS providers, both ground and air, to sign a memorandum of agreement (MOA) with DSHS to provide mutual aid in pending or actual disasters. The advantage of the agreement is that it ensures providers will receive prompt reimbursement from DSHS of a predetermined amount, as outlined in the MOA, for costs incurred when asked by DSHS to respond to disaster situations. The MOA also provides a way for DSHS to identify resources to help local communities respond when their own resources are overwhelmed. To link to the MOA for ground or air providers, go to the Office of EMS/Trauma Systems website at www.tdh.state.tx.us/hcqs/ems and look for the link at the top of the page with the picture of the ambulances.